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WASHINGTON, DC - Early this morning the U.S. House of Representatives passed on suspension a bill (H.R. 6428) sponsored by Rep. Charlie Melancon and Rep. Richard Baker authorizing part of the Morganza to the Gulf hurricane and storm protection project. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-La.) introduced similar legislation in the Senate Friday. When the entire Morganza project is complete, the series of levees, locks and other flood control systems through Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes will protect about 120,000 people and 1,700 square miles of land against storm surges such as those caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"The people of Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes have been sitting ducks in the face of hurricanes, unprotected from disastrous storm surges and flooding" said Rep. Charlie Melancon. "Tonight, we successfully moved forward with changing that. After years of setbacks, part of the Morganza to the Gulf project is finally authorized and south Louisiana is one major step closer to greater protection from hurricanes and flooding."

"America learned tragically how important our little corner of the world is to the national economy," said Rep. Richard Baker. "'Morganza' recognizes this and takes the necessary steps to further protect south Louisiana. I am proud to have collaborated on this bipartisan effort and commend the hard work of Congressman Melancon and Senator Landrieu. And I want to pay tribute to Senator Vitter and former Congressman Billy Tauzin who have labored years to make this moment possible."

The Melancon-Baker partial authorization bill includes two reaches of levees, totaling 76,000 feet, tying into the already existing system of levees from Larose to Golden Meadow. These levees would provide the most protection possible with the limited resources currently available. The bill also authorizes the lock complex on the Houma Navigation Canal to protect against devastating storm surges, such as the one during Hurricane Katrina that ran up the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet and destroyed St. Bernard Parish. In addition, Houma would be protected from salt water intrusion in their drinking water.

The Senate is expected to pass H.R. 6428 before adjourning.

"It has become abundantly clear that, yet again, Congress intends to go home without passing a WRDA bill," Sen. Landrieu said today. "Six years after Congress gave Morganza to the Gulf its first green light, it is simply not fair to delay it further simply because the Corps' bureaucracy couldn't deliver a report on time and because Congress couldn't pass a new bill in several years. There is no other item in WRDA that has been kicked down the road as many times as this. I thank my colleagues in the House for joining me and Congressmen Baker and Melancon in supporting this authorization and finally beginning to fulfill the promise we first made to the people of South Louisiana more than six years ago"

The Morganza project was originally authorized in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2000. However, the Army Corps of Engineers submitted their feasibility report for Morganza over a year past the deadline, causing the authorization to expire despite the Corps' favorable recommendation. Since then, Congress has repeatedly failed to pass a new WRDA bill, stalling authorization for Morganza to the Gulf.

Time is of the essence in this effort, as every delay in implementing the Morganza to the Gulf hurricane protection project leaves hundreds of thousands of people in south Louisiana vulnerable to future hurricanes. While 2006 was a relatively quiet year for hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, devastating storms similar to Hurricanes Rita and Katrina are expected in the future.

Rep. Melancon added, "We in south Louisiana have been fighting for years to get the Morganza to the Gulf hurricane and storm protection project authorized. Thanks to the efforts of Congressman Baker, Senator Landrieu and the rest of the Louisiana delegation, we have cleared a major hurdle and should have partial authorization for this vital project before Congress adjourns."

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